

THE VOLGA GERMANS: RELIGIOUS CONDUCT AND CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS

Religion and the Church

"So the time went by with building and the Easter season had almost past without anyone of us making his Easter duty. On the first Sunday after Easter we drove to Ebsworth in order to go to confession, but we couldn't. There was no priest who knew German. The pastor wrote therefore to Bishop Fink in Leavenworth, with the result that in the early part of May Father Adolf Wibert from Salina came here. This priest was it who said on the first Mass out here in the Prairie in a grass-house and I serving him. All of us went to Confession and Holy Communion. From now on he visited us every three months till August 1877. Only once between had Father Huhn said Mass for us in Bissings simolinka.

"On the height, about the place where now Alexander Mais is living, we erected a cross on Mai 3, the feast of the Finding of the Cross. To this cross we walked every Sunday and weekdays in the evening saying the Rosary, and on the way back, too. Standing around the Cross we prayed a Litany and sang hymns. These were our divine service (Gottesdienst)."

Some Details of My Mother's Life

"She has been the daughter of a schoolmaster, Lorenz Beilman. She has been a woman who, so to say, lived only for others. She let never a poor one go away without any consolation if ever she could help it.

"She visited the sick of the parish and was always at their deathbeds and prayed with them till they died.

"She went to the sick at day and at night, whenever she was called, not minding rain or snow, no trouble was too much for her, especially helpful was to the women in labor. Therefore, everybody loved and honored her like a mother.

"She has been, almost uninterruptedly, the president of the Christian Mothers for the 19 years she belonged to it. When the priest needed some money for the church, to buy something now, he only needed to go to the president and she got the necessary money together with her women.

"No need to care about the children at home. She taught them to pray and prayed with them, helped with the lessons in the catechism, with the Mass prayers for the altar-boys, in a word cared for everything.

"Furthermore, she had had a good schooling, and was especially a good singer. She knew all the songs by heart for the different feasts of the church year. No need to say that she had been pious and prayed a lot. That is for sure. She had been the first member of the Third Order and had remained a faithful member up to her death, for 26 years. She wanted to be buried next to our father; that was done, of course."

From "Reminiscences from the Life of
Athanasius Karlin"

The church and the family were very important to the Catholic Volga Germans, of which the Katharinenstadt group were a part. Almost all holiday festivals and celebrations in some way involved both of those institutions. Family and church were the foundations of a traditional Volga German way-of-life.

Christmas Customs

Although life was hard for the Volga Germans when they first settled in Kansas, they celebrated Christmas and the entire holiday season with enthusiasm. Just as many of our Christmas customs revolve around children, so did theirs.

On December 6th, a gruff-looking person in the village dressed up as Sankt Nikolaus (Saint Nicholas) and talked with the children about how they had behaved over the last year. He scolded them for the bad things they had done. Good children received a treat of nuts or candy.

Several days before Christmas the family gathered in one room of the house. The mother who was outside passed gifts in front of the window as she knelt below out of sight. One can imagine the excitement of the children as they saw toys and goodies passed in front of their eyes. No doubt they were very good children from that time until Christmas!

One appealing folk belief was that when the sky was red at sunset on the days before Christmas, the angels were busy baking cookies for the holidays.

Even some of the animals must have looked forward to Christmas. It was a custom in Volga German homes to bake an extra loaf of bread for the cat and dog. Bad luck was supposed to result if the family forgot to bake this gift for their pets.

The Herald of Christ

On Christmas Eve, a bell tinkled at the door, announcing to the children inside that the herald of the Christ Kindlein (Christ Child) was outside. After

a knock on the door, a woman entered. Her face was veiled and she was dressed in white with a blue girdle. She saluted the family with the greeting "Gelobt sei Jesus Christus" (Praised be Jesus Christ).

Then one by one she talked with the children of the family. The youngest was first and would recite a short prayer for the herald to show that he or she was willing to work hard to learn such a passage. The herald rewarded the young child with gifts from the Christ Child. Next, she called the older children to her and scolded them for not always being good. She then also gave them gifts. At the end of her visit, the lady-in-white tossed nuts into the air and as the children scrambled for them, disappeared out the door.

The rest of Christmas Eve was devoted to merriment and good food. All the family gathered together for a holiday feast. Following a Russian custom, the Volga Germans met together in their parents' home. They settled disagreements and debts owed to one another from the last year and then all attended Midnight Mass together. If the moon shown bright during the Mass, it was believed the next year would bring a good harvest. After services, friends and relatives stopped to greet each other.

Christmas Day was another day for calling on friends and neighbors. Children went to see their godparents to offer them good wishes for the holidays. In return, they were given nuts and sweets which they carried away in a special white cloth.

New Years Day

New Years Day festivities began early in the morning with a visit to the children's godparents. There, the children spoke the traditional New Year greeting:

"Ich wunsche Euch ein gluckseliges Neujaar, langes Leben, Gesundheit, Freide und Enigkeit, nach denr Tode die ewige Gluckseligkeit." "I wish you a happy New Year, long life, health, peace, and harmony, and after death eternal happiness."

The children were rewarded with sweets and headed on to other relative's and friends' homes to wish them a happy New Year.

Young men also celebrated the New Year with gusto. They began shooting off shotguns in front of their friends' houses at midnight and continued to visit and shoot guns into the air throughout the day. After firing their gun at a house, they were invited inside, recited a short verse and were given food and drink. The girls in the house pinned ribbons on the young men's coats, the size and color of the ribbon depending upon how much the girl liked the boy. A red ribbon meant she loved him, a pink one that she didn't like him, and any other color meant he was just a friend. Both the children and the young men were known as "Wuenschers" or well-wishers.

Sometimes a brass band was formed for New Year's Day and beginning at the priest's house, made its way around the village serenading each family.

Easter

The Volga German children believed in the Easter rabbit just as many American children do today. On Saturday night before Easter, their mother put plates out on the table in a room which was then locked. The Easter rabbit came during the night and filled those plates with cookies, candy, and eggs. In the morning the father and children armed themselves with clubs and pepper shakers and prepared to catch the rabbit. If they caught him, they had cookies and candy all year long. But when they unlocked the door, the rabbit always escaped. The children walked into the room saying, "Der Has hat schon gelegt!" "The rabbit has laid!"